THE FUTURE OF FREEMASONRY

IN the April number of the Masonic World, Bro. J. E. Morcombe, the editor, has an arresting article under the title "Freemasonry at the Crossroads." It is one that should have the widest publicity, for, in spite of the assertions by those who love to prophesy smooth things, there is a crisis in the affairs of the Craft.

The keynote of the article is given in the first paragraph, in which Bro. Morcombe quotes a Past Grand Master of California:

> I expect that Masonry will continue to exist for a long period of time - forever, as the usual phrase goes. But I am not so sure that it will hold its present high place in the estimation of men ...

This recalls a dictum of Albert Pike, in reference to a state of affairs somewhat similar to that with which we are now faced, which existed some years after the Civil War. He said that "Masonry, by its nature intended to be exclusive, had become popular."

We all know the really extraordinary influx into the Fraternity that began just after the World War, and which reached its peak in 1921, in which year very nearly three hundred thousand men became members. The article in THE BUILDER just a year ago entitled "Where Are We Drifting ?" may be recalled. In the second of the charts there given the curves of gains and losses indicated that in a year or two they would meet. This forecast has been fulfilled. In some Grand Lodges the year 1929 has actually shown a net loss of members, and others are at a standstill.

This condition is not peculiar to the Masonic Fraternity. It is known, and Bro. Morcombe in his article gives the figures, that other fraternal organizations are faced with the same conditions, and even more intensely. And not only fraternal societies, but clubs and churches are feeling the pinch of slackened interest and loss of members.

Statistics of membership give a somewhat superficial test of an institution's condition. Members there must be, obviously, but without knowing the quality little of value can be deduced from the quantity. Masonry has in the past attained a high reputation in the world, but this reputation was not in the least founded on the number of men who were Masons, but on their character. It was because in every community it was observed that many of the best men, the men most respected, the men most trusted, were of the Craft, that Masonry gained the reputation it has enjoyed. And reputation cannot long survive the conditions which give rise to it.

It is obvious, because it is common human nature, that as soon as any state or condition is highly esteemed in the community there will be a greatly increased desire to attain to it. In proportion as a society is highly esteemed, and membership in it is regarded as a distinction, so will the number increase of those who desire to join it for the benefits it will bring them personally. In other words, the more an institution prospers the greater the number of parasites who seek to attach themselves to it. The condition is inevitable, human nature being what it is.

It is those who give who make an institution, whether it is a society, a church, or a nation. It is those who take without giving who reduce it to weakness. The parasites can hardly be wholly eliminated, but when their number grows to be too great the organization, or organism, is weakened, becomes sickly, and may even die.

We in America have been bitten by the lust for size, for numbers, for wealth. Freemasonry has in every country and in every period reflected in its own way the external environment. Some things it yields to, others it opposes, but whichever it be, it would not so act but for the existing conditions. The things that are accepted as a matter of course in the environment inevitably outnumber those which are resisted. That we should be gratified by increase in our numbers is natural, and such increase is not in itself evil so long as the level of qualification is maintained. But to maintain the standard means that increase in numbers must be set on one side as an aim. It is not something to be sought for, but if it comes, it must come of itself.

It is an undoubted fact that it has become altogether too easy for men to enter our lodges. The standard has been lowered; and though in theory any brother may undertake the task of raising it through the ballot box, in reality he is helpless. In most lodges it would be impossible, even could he devote his whole time to it, for a brother personally to satisfy himself of the qualifications of every applicant. Besides even those who feel the situation most keenly are necessarily affected by the actual conditions. They inevitably feel that it is hard to reject a man who is no whit worse than many who are already in the lodge. The effect is cumulative, and increases in geometrical proportion. And while it may be true that candidates should not be accepted for negative reasons, because there appears nothing overt against their being received, but that there should be something positive, something in their life and character that fits them for initiation, yet it is most difficult to act on this principle, for it has come to such a pass that most Masons actively resent the rejection of any petition they have presented to the lodge and regard it as a personal injury. For one brother, or even a group, to attempt to act in this way would mean in most cases a disruption of the harmony of the lodge. It is a choice of evils.

These obvious conditions, that all thinking brethren deplore, do not stand alone, they are all really symptoms, by-products of the way in which the Craft in America has developed, incidents of its evolution. It is this that makes it so difficult to find a remedy. Most expedients that are offered do not touch the deep-seated root of the evil. Perhaps there is now no cure but the operation of natural laws. If the represent tendencies continue the Fraternity will lose its prestige, many will drop out, fewer will seek to join, and finally, it may be, a fresh start can be made.

Yet we can hardly be satisfied to wait for this process, which may end in death rather than cure. We must strive as we can to improve matters. There are thousands of Masons who are Masons in fact as well as in name, and could they work unitedly much might be accomplished. Much more is being accomplished as a matter of fact than we know, even as Elijah learned there were men in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal. The problem is gradually being realized, most Grand Lodges are now actively trying to do something to meet it. The first necessity is to realize that the body is sick, the next to diagnose the disease. After that there may be some hope of a cure if the right treatment can be found.

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